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AFRICAN CULTURAL MEMORY IN NEW ORLEANS MUSIC

JASON BERRY

The symbolic language of a culture rises from its core, a vocabulary encoded by sound and sight, rooted in historical memory. In music and dance, in costumes and religious life, the past articulates its presence.

The language lives in the marching dancers of a second line—parade-step improvisations, the feet hitting streets in cross-rhythm to the swish and thump of the big bass drum. And so with the elegiac funeral dirges, jazzmen slowly ushering the casket toward earthly rest, and then the cutting loose of trombones and trumpets announcing the soul's ascent. These are rituals of living history, when poetic movements of the street revolve around a vernacular of jazz.

There was a time, deep in the city's past, when the reach of African memory cradled a portion of what is now Louis Armstrong Park. In 1800 the area was a grassy plain set back behind the Vieux Carré, surrounded by wood and swamps. Slaves gravitated to the site for large, Sunday drum-and-dance convocations. It became known as Place Congo, and in later generations, with English supplanting French as the local language, Congo Square.

Congo Square was a phenomenon of the New World, but its essence came from West Africa. Like the *macumba* cults of Brazil, *santería* of Cuba, and *vodun* of Haiti, a spiritual sensibility gathered ferment here, animated by percussive music and communal dance. These urges of the mother culture formed a vital link with rituals of the past; they connected people to their history.

A river of percussions poured out of Congo Square, spilling into divergent tributaries as generations moved beyond slavery (see Berry, Foose, and Jones 1986, 207+). The currents branched into streams of jazz, of rhythm-and-blues, and of Mardi Gras Indians' music. Today, the imprint of those ancient hands and feet has left an indelible mark on New Or-

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leans. No other North American city has such a pronounced African identity.

In the 1720s thousands of slaves were shipped from coastal West Africa to New World colonies. Thrown together from different ethnic backgrounds, they shared a spiritual sensibility. The sub-Saharan map was blanketed by animist religions. To the Yoruba of Nigeria, life consisted of interweaving zones: the living, the dead, the unborn. In rituals still performed, masked figures dance to percussive rhythms and invoke ancestral spirits, called *orisas* (Soyinka 1976, 4, 10; Thompson 1974, 192).

There are several variations of the Yoruba creation myth—a supreme being, Zeus-like, dispatching surrogate figures to found the kingdom. The *dramatis personae*, represented in masks and appeased in rituals, evince clear parallels with the ancient Greeks. In each case, however, the *orisas* are acknowledged to have been actual people, whose memories live on spiritually, via the recall of ritual (Fadipe 1970, 262).

“We can insist that the world of the unborn is older than the world of the ancestor,” Wole Soyinka, the Noble laureate, has written, “in the same breath as we declare that the deities preceded humanity into the universe . . . and are an expression of its cyclic nature” (Soyinka 1976, 10).

In Africa the carved horns, gourds, calabashes, and sanzans surrounded the drumbeats and intensified the chants, with people enacting ritual drama through intricate dance steps or parading in long lines. They honored the dead for their existential presence, and they were not above comedic commentary on the deeds and misdeeds of kith and kin. In many tribes they wore masks—spirit faces of the ancestors, or deities, of animals, and of nature forces.

In the “talking drums” of Yorubaland, as with the Ewe of Ghana and drummers of other tribes, tonal currents of the drum communicated actual words (Chernoff 1979). The drumvoice and the mask formed a continuum: the one gave words-as-tone, the other, an imagery of spirit. Ritual memory—the center of gravity in religious worship—crossed the Atlantic in slaveholds of the Middle Passage.

Only now the masks lay buried in savannahs of the mind; percussion in the white man’s land had to be forged anew—in time away from the cruel logic of survival. Most of the runaways brought before the Superior Council of Louisiana had fled plantations because of ill-treatment or lack of food (Brasseaux 1980, 149).

And yet, as Genovese (1974), Gutman (1976), and others have shown, it was in the planters’ self-interest to provide at least subsistence for their slaves. In Louisiana, writes Carl Brasseaux (1980, 155):

The lax supervision of slaves on weekends also furnished blacks with the opportunity to gather for social events. Police regulations adopted during the French regime repeatedly castigated slaveholders for permitting slaves from several concessions to assemble for weddings or dancing the *calinda*. These gatherings were frequently held in New Orleans, where they provided a public menace because many inebriated participants "perpetuated a thousand thefts (*brigandages*).\" Rural blacks relied upon their masters' working stock to transport them to nocturnal assemblies; in fact, the practice became so prevalent that, in 1751, the colonial government authorized any settler to fire upon any of the "Negroes who work to death all of the colony's horses riding to excess."

The *calinda*, wrote George Washington Cable ([1886] 1959, 11) in a famous essay linking Congo Square to rituals of the West Indies, was "a grossly personal satirical ballad . . . a dance of multitude, a sort of vehement cotillion." As a lyrical prototype, the *calinda* spawned endless variations.

I thank Dr. Barry Jean Ancelet for permission to quote from his paper on *zarico* music that appears in this publication: "The popular Cajun song 'Allons danser, Colinda,' in which the singer exhorts a young lady named Colinda to dance with him while her mother is not around, is a borrowing from the Creole tradition" (Ancelet 1988, 35). In a similar, extended context, we might place Ernie K-Doe's R&B hit of 1961, the titular refrain "Mother-in-Law" answering that testy message: "the *worst* person I know."

Calinda was but one manifestation of African ritualizing. The deeper strain was spiritual, and in this respect, New Orleans looked south, to Haiti. Enslaved Africans on the island of Saint Domingue (as The Republic of Haiti was known before liberation in 1804) left a strong imprint of the Fõn tribe of Dahomey. Their spirits, whose literal human pasts lived in rituals, were called *loa*, and like the Nigerian *orisas*, they required supplication. In Haiti, Melville Herskovits (1971, 23) reported, the most durable spiritual expression was the *vodun* of Fõn-speaking people.

In a more recent essay on voodoo art, Robert Farris Thompson (1978, 26) observes that the Yoruba and Dahomean religious expressions fused with spiritual strands of other tribes, casting a syncretistic web in Haiti. "Actually," he writes, "*vodun* is Africa *reblended*."

In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, waves of *gens de couleur* and ex-slaves came from Haiti to New Orleans, many via Cuba. By then, three generations had passed since the first slaves arrived and the literal vocabulary of Africa was practically erased. But the *forms* of religious worship, reblended, created a cultural passageway, giving disparate peoples the dream of a common language.

New Orleans was not the only place where flames of the mother culture glowed anew. In Albany, New York, blacks in the late eighteenth century gathered for Pinkster Day, a Hebrew Pentacostal feast fifty days before Passover. A mock chief, dressed in a "strange and fantastical costume," was said to have been an African prince. At such gatherings, the late Herbert Gutman (1976, 333) wrote:

Eel-pots covered with sheepskin served as musical instruments among the Albany blacks, who sang "an African refrain 'Hi-a-bomba-bomba-bomba'" and danced what some called "the Toto dance."

The Albany Common Council prohibited such "bacchanalian revels" in 1811. Similar celebrations occurred among New York City, Brooklyn, and Long Island blacks, and in Pennsylvania and Maryland.

In St. Martinville, Louisiana, in 1823, we find slaves gathering on Sundays "in the open space before the Church, where they conducted their weird and fantastic dances which they had brought with them from Africa" (Baudier 1939, 354). But where other parts of the South outlawed drumming, New Orleans authorities were more lenient in that regard. What distinguishes Congo Square from these examples, what separates the city from the rest of the South, was the sustained impact of the drumming as a spiritual force and the sprouting of local voodoo pockets—the *form* if not the actual vocabulary of religious ceremony in Africa. By keeping these things alive, the slaves gave light to their past, illuminating the city with a distinct self-image.

Jazz is the high statement of this identity. It emerged in the late 1890s from working-class neighborhoods, articulating a cultural voice: the African improvisational genius advancing through European instruments and melodies, with ragtime, military marches, church songs, and blues in varying accents.

In tribal music—and perhaps this is the ultimate African contribution to jazz as well as R&B—cross-rhythms form the spine of dancing ritual. What we label "call-and-response" is much more than a vocal tradition, as associated with soaring gospel choirs behind a singing preacher, or the audience cries amidst exhortations of a James Brown or Ernie K-Doe.

Call-and-response also has primordial human instruments—the sound of the feet hitting the earth or the floor, the hands clapping, the body movements responding to the dominant rhythm uttered tonally on the drums. In New Orleans the purest beauty of this tradition is found in the second line parades surrounding brass bands, especially at jazz funerals.

In 1983, on a field trip to The People's Republic of Benin, formerly the

Kingdom of Dahomey, I got a deeper sense of this tradition (Berry 1983a). A museum in the old capitol of Abomey was surrounded by a large stone wall. The interior opened into a cluster of buildings that displayed figurines and art works chronicling Dahomean history. The central building housed the thrones of departed kings; the monarchy ended in the early twentieth century with final conquest by the French.

The thrones were rather small, elaborately carved wooden seats; behind them hung brightly-colored tapestries with fetish animals commemorating each monarch. Scenes of beheadings and men captured as slaves were woven into the tapestries. Glele, a legendary king of the late nineteenth century, commanded an army of nearly a thousand women who defeated the Yoruba and neighboring tribes, as well as fighting the French.

Glele's fetish was the lion. The tapestry showed a bright yellow face with blue mane and a jet-black body. The umbrella affixed to Glele's throne caught my eye. An umbrella. Then, slowly, I scanned the wall shrouded in tapestries of kings passed into history: umbrellas were affixed to each throne. In life, each king had servants who held an umbrella above him, hence the umbrellas stood as icons on the thrones.

My thoughts reversed along the grid of years to so many second lines and funerals I had seen from boyhood forward, how the ornate and bead-bedecked parasols bobbed above the dancing marchers like radiant mushrooms beneath the sun. When did the umbrella, now an icon in the city's street parades, first become a fixture? There is no definitive history of the jazz funeral as yet; whoever writes it must also chronicle the umbrella.

The emergence of brass band jazz in the late nineteenth century harnessed tribal drumming, gave it new shape and definition through the military cadences. One genius of ensemble jazz was its distillation of call-and-response into instrumental dialogues, as in the early Armstrong-King Oliver recordings. From there it was not a far leap to Louis's eloquent horn replies to the vocals of Bessie Smith and other blues singers.

African drumming in New Orleans submerged long before the birth of jazz. Congo Square rituals were suppressed in 1835, though scattered remnants likely endured. Voodoo cultists kept it going, more or less covertly, into Reconstruction. In the early 1880s the tribal percussion sensibility shifted to hand-held instruments with the emergence of Mardi Gras Indian tribes.

Carnival was a celebration of Christian origin, but the masks, parades, and public frivolity created a cultural opening through which blacks em-

braced the Indian persona. The degree to which intermarriage and Indian bloodlines influenced this tradition is still unclear; traveling Wild West shows brought a spectacle of costumes for adaptive use. But the tap root of this Carnival hybrid lay in a shared sense of rebellion. Africans and Indians were oppressed peoples, each steeped in a spiritual past.

The Indian chants were not set to drums, but to tambourines, sticks, and bottles. They did not engage in spirit worship as we use the term; but through a slowly building body of coded chants, they established a tribal history, praising Indians and celebrating the spirit of rebellion.

And yet, just as gentry of the ante-bellum era gawked at Congo Square dancers, so later generations of white onlookers—and not a few members of the black bourgeoisie—viewed black Indians of Mardi Gras as mere makers of exotica.

The tribes were quite more than that. The historical memory of Indians matched that of Africans in vital ways. Indian tribes were called nations; in Africa, kingdoms. Both community structures placed chiefs at the crest of a hierarchy. Both races honored ancestral spirits, albeit different ones, and believed in spirits who inhabited natural forces around them. Both lived close to the land, with musical ceremonies grounded in percussion (Berry, Foose, and Jones 1986, 208).

The tradition apparently began about 1883.

Out of Chief Becate Batiste's tribe, the Creole Wild West, grew a fascinating hierarchy, a tribal structure that spread into different neighborhoods and, by the early twentieth century, formed the organizational patterns of later tribes (Berry, Foose, and Jones 1986, 211).

Most Indians come from housing projects and poor streets; the tradition is predominantly male, with fathers and uncles often bringing sons and nephews through leadership ranks.

In 1981 and 1982, while reconstructing tribal lineages through interviews, I was struck by the long period in which the Indians were a faint echo in the city's musical consciousness. Jelly Roll Morton spoke of them in his famous Smithsonian sessions with Alan Lomax in 1938 and sang the "t'ouwais bas q'ouwais" chant (Lomax 1973, 15). In 1956 Samuel Charters recorded a tribe called the White Eagles, singing a cappella chants (Charters n.d.).

Well before the Indians emerged in the full colors of pop culture, an idiosyncratic keyboard wizard named Henry Roeland Byrd was building his own bridge across the percussive rivers. Better known as Professor Longhair, Byrd played in the shadow of Fats Domino throughout his life. The Fat Man gave R&B a happy, dance-hall beat. Byrd sang with the

deep heart of a bluesman, a less commercial style; his piano signature was something else altogether.

As a teenager in the Depression he made the rounds of Rampart Street honky-tonks, developing a sense of rhythm through tap dancing. He learned piano by trading tunes with the likes of Champion Jack Dupree and Sonny Boy Williamson. In time, he took the drum-infused movements of his feet and translated them to the keyboard. With a sizzling left hand, he layered melodies with intricate rhythm patterns, melding boogie-woogie with what he called "a mixture of mambo, rumba, and Calypso" (White 1980, 32).

He left us a marvelous songbag. "Big Chief," written by rhythm-and-bluesman Earl King and recorded in 1964, was Fess's homage to the Mardi Gras Indians. "Me big chief me gottem tribe, got my spy boy by my side," he sang—with a curtain of shakers and drum thumping behind his own stride across the ivories.

A series of solid drummers worked with Fess over the years, and in the 1970s he added a conga player, Alfred Roberts, whose undulating beat formed a percussive layer for Byrd to key off. In a sense, those conga licks brought the African tradition on hand-drumming, long submerged since Congo Square, back into the local mainstream.

As for the Indians, they finally entered the pop currents in 1970 with a 45 rpm single, "Handa Wanda," as sung by Bo Dollis, chief of the Wild Magnolias, with crisp arrangements by pianist-vocalist Willie Tee (Wilson Turbinton).

Turbinton orchestrated two "Wild Magnolia" LPs after that; then, in 1976 the Meters band teamed with the Neville brothers and their uncle, George Landry, otherwise known as Big Chief Jolley—chief of the Wild Tchoupitoulas. The LP named for the tribe, featuring Landry's warm, hearty vocals, fused street chants and folk rhythms, set to exceptional instrumental backing.

Quite a lot has been written about the Nevilles and Big Chief Jolley, who died in 1980, seven months after Professor Longhair. *The Wild Tchoupitoulas* album, for my money, ranks with the best recordings made here. One song, "Brother John," is a cameo of the oral traditions. It was written by Cyril Neville—singer, conga player, and youngest of Landry's nephews—a eulogy to John "Scarface" Williams, who sang with Huey Smith and the Clowns in the 1950s and became a Mardi Gras Indian in the 1960s. He was stabbed to death outside a bar in 1972, shortly after Carnival. Here are the words, as Cyril sang them:

Well I remember that mawnin'
My brother John fell.
Brother John is gone!

Well now, Cora, he died on
the battlefield . . .

And the rest of his gang
They wont bow, they wont kneel.
Brother John is gone!

On the first "Wild Magnolias" LP, Wilson Turbinton sang of Corey, a rebellious slave. Neville's interpretation advanced a story-in-song, first recorded by jazz banjoist Danny Barker years earlier, "Corinne Died on the Battlefield"—about a woman. According to Paul Longpre, a former chief of the Golden Blades, her name was Cora Anne—a queen with the Battlefield Hunters—who was killed in a crossfire between two tribes in a fight during the late 1920s. As the legend came down through the years, Cora Ann became Corinne, and then Corey, and finally a man named Cora (Berry, Foose, and Jones 1986, 235).

Although street fights between Indians were at an ebb by the 1940s, the violence of early conflicts bears scrutiny. They fought for the same reason other poor people sometimes fight: out of anger and frustration, as a catharsis to the internal tensions of a community. The framework of Carnival gave heightened meaning to the costumes and sense of rebellion, with ritualized battle sometimes spilling into literal violence.

Today it is a largely peaceful tradition, with competition in the costume art and a new-found sense of pride in musical acceptance and attention by the media. As a retention of African memory, the Indians follow the Congo Square dancers and voodoo cultists in the progression of a core culture.

In the final measure, the tradition that most dramatically revives African memory is the jazz funeral. It has always been, for me, the most eloquent of rituals—a poem of lamentation. Trappings of the funeral procession have evolved with shifts in music and changes in dress, but the root sensibility stems from a belief system in which death is one stage in the longer journey of a spirit.

In recent years the tradition has undergone a permutation of sorts, with Mardi Gras Indians advancing to higher ground. The funeral in November 1981 of Big Chief Pete, leader of the Black Eagles tribe, was one such moment writ large. His real name was Percy Lewis, and in real life he had worked for the previous twenty years in the custodial department

at Tulane University, holding down several other jobs to support his large family (Berry 1983b, 20).

About a thousand people gathered in the street in front of the central city funeral home that day. Photographers hovered around a wooden hearse at the side door of the mortuary. A horse, stoic as the cross atop the long wagon with open side panels, waited in place.

The burial director, Joseph Misshore, explained that the horse-drawn hearse had been in the family business for years. "We don't advertise it," he said. "But it's always available. And Pete's family said they wanted it. It dates back to, oh, I'd say about 1880."

Now the funeral party emerged from the mortuary. Like the chorus of a Greek tragedy, jazzmen announced the arrival of death. But somber they were not. This was the Majestic brass band, horns glinting in the sun, playing "Bye and Bye," a gospel standard done in slow-time, as a dirge.

The family followed; one of Chief Pete's daughters began sobbing uncontrollably as the coffin, decked with Indian feathers, was slowly, solemnly placed into the hearse by pallbearers.

Then the horse began to move; the Majestic band proceeded ahead, followed by the Scene Boosters, a social marching club of which Pete had also been a member. They wore white suits with bright yellow sashes and were soon joined by a younger, offshoot group called the Mellow Fellows, in white with maroon trim. The hearse was surrounded by a handful of Black Eagles in Indian costumes and the final contingent of the sprawling procession, the Dirty Dozen, one of the premier brass bands.

It was a disorganized procession at first. The Indians moved the hearse out front, practically sprinting alongside the horse, rounding the corner of Washington and LaSalle which is bordered on one side by Shakespeare Park, on the other by the Magnolia Street housing project. Just down the street on LaSalle, one saw the fading sign of the Dew Drop Inn, the hearth of rhythm-and-blues during the post-war segregation era.

With billowing feathers and ostrich plumes—red, blue, yellow—the Black Eagles sang: "Hoo-Na-Ney/My big chief got a golden crown/Hoo-Na-Hay/My big chief got a golden crown!"—surrounded by about one hundred chanting black men.

It took nearly twenty minutes for the Scene Boosters, marching in carefully-sculpted cadences—one leg out, bodies leaning, then both feet close together, the next leg out—to join the Indians at the corner by Magnolia project. Here was the dichotomy of jazz and Indian music, slowly come together—the ancient dirges advancing up LaSalle Street to meet the pounding rhythms and tambourine jangling of the Indians, in a swell of

chanting men and women, some drinking from bottles sheathed in paper bags while the scent of weed suffused the crowd. In the distance came two policemen on horses, but the funeral was clearly in possession of the street.

The Dirty Dozen marched forward, surrounded by second-liners dipping and swaying, and the full gathering forged ahead, waves on waves of people rippling down Washington Avenue, past the brick projects, hardly a paleface in sight, on and on the funeral coursed, past sagging honky-tonks where Percy Lewis had held Indian practice sessions for fourteen autumns past. Then the funeral drew to a halt. A glass of wine was raised in the dead man's honor and doused on the wooden hearse. Big Chief Pete was gone, like *orisas* of old, to the ranks of cultural ancestry.

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